

BELIZE 2022 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Belize is a constitutional parliamentary democracy. In the most recent national election, held in 2020, the People's United Party won 26 of 31 seats in the National Assembly and selected John Briceno as prime minister. King Charles III is the head of state and is represented by a governor general. In May 2021, Froyla T'zalam assumed the post of governor general following the retirement of Sir Colville Young.

The Ministry of Home Affairs and New Growth Industries has responsibility for law enforcement and maintenance of order. The Belize Police Department is primarily responsible for internal security, including police and prisons. The Ministry of National Defence and Border Security, responsible for oversight of the military and the Coast Guard, provides limited support domestically to civilian authorities. The Belize Defence Force has limited powers of arrest within land and shoreline areas, and the Coast Guard has arrest powers and jurisdiction within coastal and maritime areas. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces. There were reports that members of the security forces committed some abuses.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: abuse and inhuman treatment by security and prison officers; arbitrary arrest and detentions; refoulement of refugees to a country where they would face threats to their lives and freedom; serious corruption by government officials; and substantial barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services.

The government took steps to prosecute some public officials who committed abuses, but there were few successful prosecutions. The government did not effectively implement the laws on corruption, and officials often engaged in corrupt practices with impunity.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. The Professional Standards Branch of the Belize Police Department (BPD), Belize Defence Force Adjutant Office, and Belize Coast Guard Adjutant Office investigate security force killings and pursue prosecutions when necessary.

On August 18, four police officers, including a police inspector and a police sergeant, were arrested for contributing to the death of Derrick Uh. Uh was detained for the alleged sexual assault of a woman on August 14. He was placed in a sealed prisoner van and later transported to the local police station but was not removed from the vehicle until 13 hours later, when a police officer found his lifeless body. A forensic investigation determined that Uh died due to heat stroke as a consequence of prolonged confinement in an enclosed space. The four officers were released on bail and were suspended from duty while the investigation was underway.

In July, police corporal Kent Martinez was acquitted of manslaughter for the 2019 death of Allyson Major. Court reports indicated the judge advised the jury to return a not guilty verdict after the prosecution failed to provide the court with forensic evidence establishing the relationship between the police-issued firearm and the bullet fragments extracted from Major's body. As of November, Martinez awaited a BPD tribunal trial concerning five other disciplinary charges.

On October 3, police officers Rommel Logan, Reydel Teck, and Jahisir Cobb were found guilty of the 2016 murder of Edwin Ixpatac. Ixpatac had been beaten to death while in police custody in the town of San Pedro.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and Other Related Abuses

The constitution prohibits torture and other inhuman punishment, but there were credible reports of abuse and use of excessive force by law enforcement agents.

Through the end of August, the Professional Standards Branch registered 69 formal complaints against members of the BPD and concluded 17 investigations with recommendations. Complaints ranged from wounding, discharging a firearm in public, extortion, and theft to harassment, preventing the course of justice, and child rape. The BPD dismissed two officers after internal tribunals found them guilty of offenses that ranged from excessive absences to physical abuse.

In April, police constable Albert Martinez and police corporal Linda Chan physically abused Shamar Foster at a local airport. Foster, a local tour guide and full-time student, claimed Martinez accosted him for being a young black man and said he did not “look like a tour guide.” The officer slapped Foster’s face, threatened to use his firearm, and accused Foster of assaulting an officer. While the BPD contended the officer was acting on a tip that a man fitting Foster’s description was transporting drugs, witnesses to the incident claimed the officer smelled strongly of alcohol. An investigation conducted by the BPD’s Professional Standards Branch found that both officers committed several infractions, for which they faced internal discipline.

The BPD partnered with the Human Rights Commission of Belize and foreign governments to provide training to officers regarding respect for human rights, standard operating procedures for detention and arrests, and justifiable use of force.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

There were reports of overcrowding and inadequate sanitation in the prison and police detention centers.

Abusive Physical Conditions: The Kolbe Foundation, a local Christian nonprofit organization, administered the country's only prison, which held men, women, and juveniles in separate areas. The government retained oversight and monitoring responsibility and provided funding. Relatives of inmates complained to NGOs of overcrowding in certain sections of the prison and dirty water for showering.

Prisoners in pretrial detention, including those held for immigration offenses, were held with convicted prisoners in the general inmate population. Officials used isolation in a small, poorly ventilated punishment cell to discipline inmates.

Administration: Authorities investigated credible allegations of mistreatment. Relatives of inmates claimed that in some instances, prison authorities were reluctant to provide information regarding their imprisoned family members.

Independent Monitoring: The prison administrator generally permitted visits from independent human rights observers. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the Human Rights Commission of Belize (HRCB) carried out limited inspections of the central prison and curtailed meetings with inmates. Visits to police detention cells were also affected by pandemic restrictions.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention and provide for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court. Media reported allegations that the government sometimes failed to observe these requirements.

On July 29, the government instituted a 30-day state of emergency for a section of Belize City to address escalating gang violence. The measure allowed the BPD and Belize Defence Force (BDF) to target criminal gangs through house raids,

arrests, and detention. Normal due process rights related to timely habeas corpus were suspended under the state of emergency. The 28 allegedly gang-affiliated men detained in the process were freed at the expiration of the state of emergency.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

Police must obtain search or arrest warrants issued by a magistrate except in cases of hot pursuit, when there is probable cause, or when the presence of a firearm is suspected. Police must inform detainees of their rights at the time of arrest and of the cause of their detention within 24 hours of arrest. Police must also bring a detainee before a magistrate to be charged officially within 48 hours. The BPD faced allegations that at times police arbitrarily detained persons for more than 24 hours without charges, did not take detainees directly to a police station, and used detention as a means of intimidation.

Police usually granted detainees timely access to family members and lawyers, although there were reports of persons held in police detention without the opportunity to contact family or seek legal advice.

There is a functioning bail system for release pending trial. By law, the police officer in charge of a station or a magistrate's court may grant bail to persons charged with minor offenses. The Supreme Court may grant bail to those charged with more serious crimes, including murder, gang activity, possession of an unlicensed firearm, and specific drug-trafficking or sexual offenses. The Supreme Court reviews the bail application within 10 working days.

Pretrial Detention: There were lengthy trial backlogs, particularly for serious crimes such as murder. Problems included delays in police completing investigations, lack of evidence collection, court delays in preparing depositions, and adjournments in the courts. Judges were typically slow to issue rulings, in some cases taking a year or longer. According to acting Chief Justice Michelle Arana, there were times during the year when courts went months without a magistrate. The time between arrest, trial, and conviction ranged from six months to two years. Pretrial detention for persons accused of murder averaged three to

four years. As of September, 413 persons, representing 37 percent of the prison population, were being held in pretrial detention, an increase of 13 percent, compared with the previous year.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence and impartiality.

Due to substantial delays and a backlog of cases in the justice system, the courts did not bring some minors to trial until they reached age 18. In such cases, the defendants were tried as minors.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the right to a fair and public trial, and the judiciary generally enforced this right, although delays in holding trials occurred.

There is no requirement for defendants to have legal representation except in cases involving murder. The Supreme Court's registrar is responsible for appointing an attorney to act on behalf of indigent defendants charged with murder. The Legal Advice and Services Center provides legal services and representation for a range of civil and criminal cases. These legal aid services were overstretched, however, and were not available in rural areas.

The HRCB continued to raise concerns that several immigration offenders remained imprisoned despite paying the necessary fines and completing their prison sentences.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Individuals and organizations may seek civil remedies for human rights abuses

through domestic courts, including the Supreme Court. Litigants may appeal cases to the Caribbean Court of Justice, the region's highest appellate court. They may also present petitions to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution prohibits such actions, but there were reports that the government at times failed to respect these prohibitions.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

The law provides for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, and the government generally respected this right. An independent press, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to promote freedom of expression, including for members of the media.

The press was largely independent of government influence, although most radio stations, television stations, and newspapers had strong editorial ties to either the United Democratic Party (UDP) or the governing People's United Party. The press was often critical of government officials, with few signs of repercussions.

Violence and Harassment: In March, a reporter for Channel 7 News, Cherisse Halsall, was forcibly removed by police officers under instruction from the government press office director that prevented her from covering the CARICOM-SICA Summit. Halsall explained she had entered an area to which regional media had been granted access to cover the event but was removed. The press office director stated Halsall did not have a specific authorization to enter the area. Other local media organizations, except for Channel 5 News, were likewise denied certain access while covering the summit. Channel 7 News director Jules Vasquez

called the incident “a flagrant and foul muzzling of the free press.”

Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other Media, including Online Media: The government did not penalize those who published items counter to government guidelines or directly censor media outlets. Anecdotal accounts, however, indicated that some media outlets practiced self-censorship to appease certain politicians and powerful businesspersons who patronized the publications.

Libel/Slander Laws: In August, the government replaced the Libel and Defamation Act with the Defamation Act of 2022. According to authorities, the new act aims “to strike a balance between the prosecution of the reputation of an individual and the freedom of speech and expression and to modernize the law of the tort of libel and slander.” Media organizations opposed the new law because they were not consulted in the process and argued the intended legislation would directly affect the way they gather, compile, and present news articles. According to Attorney General Magali Marin, the law was “not a revolutionary piece of legislation, but legislation that is simply modernizing the law of defamation.” Minister of Foreign Affairs Eamon Courtenay added the law would abolish the distinction between libel and slander, remove the requirement for persons to prove special damages to bring a claim of libel, and give media some layer of protection when disseminating information.

Neither the previous law nor the new Defamation Act were used during the year.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports that the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The law provides for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and the

government generally respected these rights. In August, the government denied the opposition UDP a permit to hold a demonstration against increases in the cost of living, but the UDP proceeded with the demonstration, and the event unfolded without incident. According to Commissioner of Police Chester Williams, the permit was not approved because the BPD was too short staffed to provide monitoring and ensure safety.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The law provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these related rights.

e. Protection of Refugees

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration, and other international organizations to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. The Ministry of Human Development, Families, and Indigenous Peoples' Affairs and the Ministry of Immigration share responsibility in handling the refugee process and in providing for refugee protection and needs.

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of refugee status, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees. The government does not recognize a legal status of "asylum" and treats all applicants as potential refugees. The courts and executive offices use procedures for refugees to cover both refugees and asylum seekers.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) indicated there was a reduction in the

number of Haitians illegally entering the country, compared with 2021. There was, however, an increase of citizens of Nicaragua, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Cuba who were either seeking refuge or in transit. The HRCB reported that 26 individuals registered complaints for not being allowed to file for refugee applications. The organization believed the actual number of denials was much higher than official figures.

In August, the government launched an amnesty program for qualifying “irregular” immigrants, including those who entered the country before March 2020, those who were previously recommended asylum seekers, and those who were under special protection by the state. The program was scheduled to close on November 30.

Refoulement: During the year, the government repatriated Cuban nationals who claimed their lives or freedom would be threatened due to their opposition to the government. Belize and Cuba have an agreement that requires Belize to return to Cuba all irregular immigrants with Cuban citizenship.

Employment: In general, persons awaiting adjudication of their refugee applications were unable to work legally in the country. A government policy introduced in 2021 allowed more than 400 persons, whose refugee status was pending finalization, to work in the sugar, citrus, and banana industries.

Access to Basic Services: Refugees and asylum seekers were able to use the education system and the socialized medical system, but the government offered no assistance with housing or food except in extreme cases that involved children and pregnant women. UNHCR reported that several refugees claimed health providers had discriminated against them when they accessed public clinics and hospitals.

Temporary Protection: The Immigration Department issued renewable special residency permits for periods of 60 to 90 days to those who applied for refugee status. A government policy allows for the renewal of protection status every three months for persons approved by the Refugee Eligibility Committee and awaiting

the minister's final approval.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In the most recent national election, held in 2020, the People's United Party won 84 percent of seats in the National Assembly, and party leader John Briceno was sworn in as prime minister. Diplomatic observers reported isolated cases of vote buying and violations of campaign rules but declared the election in general was free and fair.

Political Parties and Political Participation: During village council elections held in May, there was widespread use of government resources, such as vehicles and personnel, for campaign purposes.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No laws limit participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, and they did participate. Observers suggested cultural and societal constraints limited the number of women participating in government.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but the government did not implement the law effectively, and officials often engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. Allegations of corruption in government among public officials, including ministers, deputy ministers, and chief executive officers, were numerous, although in most cases no substantial proof was presented.

Corruption: In May, the head of the BPD's Commander Operations Strike Team

(COST), Assistant Commissioner of Police Marco Vidal, was forced to resign for negligence and administrative failures following the involvement of four of his subordinates in drug airplane landings during 2021. Facing public demands, the commissioner of police suspended Vidal for 60 days, awaiting an internal investigation. Minister of Home Affairs and New Growth Industries Kareem Musa stated that while the investigation discovered no criminal act, it found that several vehicles used daily by Vidal's team had not been acquired using the proper protocols, that there was failure to account for the use of ammunition dispensed to COST members for daily operations, and that some of that ammunition was found at the scene of one drug airplane landing. Vidal had been suspended in December 2021.

In June, Ministry of Finance documents were leaked that detailed payments made by the government to law firms connected to former Prime Minister Dean Barrow and his family during his tenure as prime minister. The payments dated from 2011 to December 2020 and totaled five million Belize dollars (\$2.5 million). Barrow conceded there were instances of "extreme exigent circumstances" when the government turned to his law firm for legal services. He explained that in some cases, payments to his law firm were from clients his firm represented who were suing the government.

In July, former Minister of Works Rene Montero returned to the country and surrendered to police following an Interpol Red Notice requesting his arrest. In September 2021, the BPD issued a wanted notice for his apprehension and arrest for the crime of "willful oppression." The Ministry of Works investigated Montero's use of human resources and government property to develop private property in which Montero had a personal financial interest. Following his return to the country, the court granted bail to Montero and confiscated his travel documents.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human

Rights

A variety of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials often were cooperative and responsive to their views.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The ombudsman, appointed by the prime minister and ratified by parliament, acts as an independent check on governmental abuses. The Office of the Ombudsman holds a range of procedural and investigative powers, including the right to enter any premise to gather documentation and the right to summon persons. The law requires the ombudsman to submit annual reports. The office does not have the power to investigate allegations against the judiciary or private entities. While the Office of the Ombudsman has wide investigative powers, it lacks effective enforcement authority. Noncompliance by the offices being investigated severely limited the effectiveness of the Office of the Ombudsman.

The office operated under significant staffing and other constraints. As of October, the post of ombudsman remained vacant after the government did not renew the contract of Lionel Arzu and failed to name a replacement. The Office of the Ombudsman remained closed, and no complaints of human rights abuses were recorded by the office. Arzu sued the government for making amendments without his consent to his three-year contract, signed in 2020 under a former administration. The changes included reductions in salary, allowances, and vacation days. In August, the court ruled in Arzu's favor, declaring that the government owed him 10,000 Belize dollars (\$5,000) for breach of contract.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape of men or women,

including spousal rape. The government generally enforced the law. The law states that a person convicted of rape should be sentenced to imprisonment for eight years to life, although on occasion sentences were much lighter. Problems facing the wider justice system generally resulted in low conviction rates for rape. Victims frequently requested the charges be dropped, often citing spousal support from the perpetrators as key to providing for their children's well-being.

In July, the Supreme Court found Paul Jex Jr. guilty of raping at gunpoint a female domestic servant and sentenced him to life imprisonment. The incident occurred in 2015 during a home invasion.

Gender-based violence remained an endemic problem. BPD data indicated that 61 percent of reported sexual violence was against girls between the ages of 10 and 19. The Belize Crime Observatory, a BPD unit, indicated women were the victims in 79 percent of the 1,685 domestic violence cases registered by the BPD through the end of July, a 20 percent increase compared with the same period in 2021.

Public perception was that insufficient numbers of police officers and inadequate funding hampered investigations. According to the BPD, two-thirds of the reports filed during the period did not result in criminal charges because the victim had withdrawn the complaint.

Some NGOs working with the BDF indicated that sexual assault was a problem in the organization. In July, a woman BDF soldier, age 23, committed suicide after she was allegedly sexually assaulted twice by a corporal at a military camp. A joint investigation was initiated by the BDF, BPD, and National Women's Commission. The inquiry continued as of the end of October.

Domestic violence is prohibited, and the law was generally enforced. Victims noted the procedure was lengthy but that nevertheless, perpetrators were convicted. Domestic violence is considered a civil matter; however, perpetrators were often prosecuted with criminal charges such as harm, wounding, grievous harm, rape, and marital rape. Police, prosecutors, and judges recognized both physical violence and mental injury as evidence of domestic violence. Penalties include

finances and imprisonment. The law empowers the Family Court to issue protection orders against accused offenders.

In February parliament passed a motion on domestic violence recognizing the health and human rights impacts it has on society. The motion called for additional resources to further strengthen the interventions, safeguards, and public awareness required to effectively address domestic violence. Legislators undertook legislative reviews aimed at filling gaps and putting in the necessary reforms for the response to domestic violence response.

In April, Tracy Thompson was killed by her common-law husband, Devon Logan. Thompson had traveled to another part of the country to start a new life when Logan broke into her house and stabbed her multiple times. Thompson's family said they believed earlier police intervention could have prevented her death, since she made numerous reports to authorities while suffering years of abuse.

In May, the governor general, with recommendation from parliament, issued a posthumous Prerogative of Mercy to pardon Nora Parham and revoke her death sentence. Parham was executed in 1963, after the court wrongly found that she had set her husband on fire. Evidence available after her trial showed that she was a victim of domestic violence and that it was her husband who lit the match that caused the fire.

The government conducted awareness campaigns against gender-based and domestic violence. It had a domestic violence hotline and shelters for victims. Major police stations designated domestic abuse officers. Due to understaffed police stations, however, these measures were not always effective.

In September, the government elevated the status of the National Women's Commission from advisory body to a statutory body under the Ministry of Human Development, Families, and Indigenous People's Affairs. The change allows the commission to legally address gender matters and coordinate all national efforts relating to gender equality, equity, and women's empowerment.

Sexual Harassment: The law provides protection from sexual harassment in the workplace, including provisions against unfair dismissal of a victim of sexual harassment in the workplace. The government enforced the law, but officials noted that no criminal cases had ever been brought under the law's sexual harassment provisions. The Women's Department, under the Ministry of Human Development, Families, and Indigenous Peoples' Affairs, recognized sexual harassment as a subset of sexual violence. Local NGOs continued to be concerned that some victims did not report sexual harassment due to fear of further victimization or losing their job.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

According to some NGOs, women from socially conservative communities seeking tubal ligation sought the permission of the husband for cultural and religious reasons. Emergency contraception was not always available as part of methods for family planning.

The government provided access to sexual and reproductive health services to survivors of sexual violence, but the government lacked rape response kits, including emergency contraception. Sexual and reproductive health services were not made available to persons under the age of 18 at public clinics without the consent of a parent or guardian.

Reports noted some religiously affiliated educational institutions did not allow pregnant girls to attend school. Because of the stigma and discrimination of underage pregnancy, some families opted not to report the matter to the authorities and instead enrolled the young girl at another institution following the birth. Male adolescents involved in the case normally did not face expulsion. Because school attendance is by law compulsory only to age 14, educational institutions are not obligated to enroll pregnant girls older than 14.

Discrimination: The law provides for the same legal status and rights for women as for men. The law mandates equal pay for equal work, but the labor

commissioner verified that men on average earned more per month than women did, often because men held higher positions, and some reports indicated women earned 55 percent that of men. Although there are no restrictions on women working in industries such as mining, construction, factories, energy, water, and transportation, the percentage of women employed in these sectors remained low. The law provides for the continuity of employment and protection against unfair dismissal, including for sexual harassment in the workplace, pregnancy, or HIV status, but the law was not enforced.

Despite legal provisions for gender equality and government programs aimed at empowering women, NGOs and other observers reported women faced social and economic discrimination. Although women participated in all spheres of national life, outnumbered men in university classrooms, and had higher graduation rates from high school, they held relatively few top managerial or government positions.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The constitution provides for the right to freedom from discrimination and violence based on race and skin color, but there are no specific laws or regulations prohibiting violence or discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity. According to the most recent census (2010), the population was approximately 47 percent Hispanic, 26 percent of African descent, and 16.5 percent Indigenous. The remainder was Asian or of unknown descent. There were anecdotal reports of racial discrimination in the workplace and in wider society against ethnic minority groups and against members of the migrant community. While there were no reports of any systemic racial or ethnic discrimination or violence, there were no government programs designed specifically to counter racial or ethnic biases.

Indigenous Peoples

No separate legal system or laws cover Indigenous persons, since the government maintains that it treats all citizens equally. Both public and private employers generally treated Indigenous persons equally with members of other ethnic groups

for employment and other purposes.

The Maya Leaders' Alliance continued a dialogue with the government and monitored development in the Toledo District with the goal of implementing the 2015 Caribbean Court of Justice consent order on Maya customary land tenure. In January, the Maya Leaders' Alliance (MLA) and the Toledo Alcalde Association (TAA) criticized how the government was implementing the court order. The two Maya organizations described the government's decision as one-sided, citing they were not consulted regarding the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent protocol before the government submitted it to the court. According to Commissioner of Indigenous Peoples' Affairs Gregory Choc, the government had consulted "extensively, respectfully, and equally" with the Maya communities and organizations stipulated in the court order. He maintained the MLA and TAA were unfairly claiming to be the sole representatives of all 41 Maya villages in the southern region of the country.

In February, villagers of the Maya community of Indian Creek raised concerns upon learning that the conservation NGO Flora and Fauna International had purchased 12,871 acres of land the villagers considered communal. The government responded that it was working to put in place the legislative and administrative framework that the Caribbean Court of Justice consent ruling had directed to find peaceful solutions to the matter and requested patience from Maya communities. Later in March, residents of the same community protested the use of their football field for the landing of a helicopter carrying Great Britain's Prince William and Princess Catherine. Maya villagers complained they had not been consulted by the authorities and were threatened by government agents with arrest if they disrupted the royal activity. The royal couple intended to visit a cocoa chocolate farm located in the community. As a result of the community's objections, the itinerary was changed.

Also in February, residents of the Garifuna community of Barranco protested government logging permits that it claimed were issued without community consultation or consent. The villagers were angered because the concessions were

issued to individuals who were not from the community, while villagers' request for logging access had been denied. In response, Minister of Sustainable Development Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management Orlando Habet stated the government was attempting to regulate the issuance of permits because in the past these were sold to companies without major benefits to the community.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship is derived by birth within the country's territory, regardless of the parents' nationalities. Citizenship may be acquired by descent if at least one parent is a citizen. Birth registration was provided on a nondiscriminatory basis. The standard requirement is for births to be registered no later than one week after birth; registration after one month is considered late and includes a small fine. Failure to register does not result in denial of public service, but it hinders the process for receiving a social security card to access services such as health care. Children without birth certificates had trouble registering for school and often had to move from school to school.

Child Abuse: The law allows authorities to remove a child from an abusive home environment and requires parents to maintain and support children until age 18. Abuse of children occurred. There were publicized cases of underage girls being victims of sexual abuse and mistreatment, in most cases in their own or a relative's home.

In April, a mother was charged for harming her age seven son with a knife that injured his hand and left eye. The boy told authorities that his mother struck him several times to the face with a knife and since the attack he had pain in the left eye and partial loss of vision. In court the woman said she "spanked" her son because he caused his baby brother to fall from the bed. The court ordered the mother to stay away from her son and placed the boy in the care of the father. In July, an age 12 girl told police that she was walking home when she was grabbed by two men and taken to an abandoned building. According to the girl, one of the men raped her while the other stood guard at the doorway. Authorities were investigating the

case.

Education: Education is free from ages five to 14, extending only to the first two years of secondary level education.

In June, a boy, age five, was prevented from enrolling in preschool because of his hair style. His father, Kevin Pollard, said the school administration told him they could not accept his son because of his hair style. Pollard claimed it was discrimination against his son for being Rastafarian. According to the school administration, the problem was not the child's religion or hair, but rather that the school had no more classroom space. Pollard tried enrolling his son at another public church-run school, but according to the father, his son was also rejected.

In August, four high school boys were denied access to Bishop Martin High School, a Catholic secondary school, because of their long hair. The Ministry of Education immediately demanded that the school reinstate the students and declared that "equal protection should be given to children regardless of their social status and that a just system should be ensured to provide for education and health on the basis of equality." After a discussion with parents and governmental officials, the administration allowed the four boys to return to school.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age to marry is 18, but persons ages 16-17 may marry with the consent of parents, legal guardians, or judicial authorities. According to UNICEF, 29 percent of women ages 20 to 49 were married or cohabiting before reaching age 18. Early marriage was more prevalent in certain areas – Toledo, Corozal, and Orange Walk – and among the Maya and Mestizo ethnic groups.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law establishes penalties for child trafficking, child pornography, child sexual exploitation, and indecent exhibition of a child. It defines a "child" as anyone younger than 18. The law allows children ages 16 and 17 to engage in consensual, noncommercial sexual activity. NGOs and experts noted this provision makes children vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation.

The legal age for consensual sex is 16, but commercial sex is not legal under age 18. Sexual intercourse with a child younger than age 14 is punishable with 12 years to life imprisonment. Sexual intercourse with a child age 14-15 is punishable with five to 10 years' imprisonment.

There were anecdotal reports that boys and girls were victims of trafficking, including through “sugar daddy” arrangements whereby older men provided money to minors, the families of minors, or both, in exchange for sexual relations with the minors. Similarly, there were reports of increased child trafficking in tourist areas or where there were transient and seasonal workers, often to meet the demand of foreign sex tourists. The law criminalizes the procurement or attempted procurement of persons younger than 18 to engage in commercial sex and stipulates a sentence of up to eight years' imprisonment. The government did not effectively enforce laws prohibiting child sex trafficking.

The law establishes a penalty of two years' imprisonment for persons convicted of publishing or offering for sale any obscene book, writing, or representation.

Antisemitism

The Jewish population was small, and there were no reports of antisemitic acts.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics

Criminalization: There are no laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on sex, which was interpreted to include sexual orientation by the judiciary. The law

prohibits “homosexual” individuals from entering the country, but immigration authorities did not enforce the law.

Violence against LGBTQI+ Persons: The NGO Promoting Empowerment Through Awareness for Lesbians and Bisexual Women (PETAL) registered 150 complaints of human rights abuses against lesbian and bisexual women as of August. According to PETAL, the abuses included employment dismissal, employment denial, refusal of authorities to register and investigate abuses, unlawful home eviction, grievous harm on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons, and cyberbullying because of the individuals’ gender identity.

The LGBTQI+ advocacy NGO UniBAM said that assault and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity were substantially underreported due to the victim’s fear of further victimization by authorities and members of the public. UniBAM’s director noted that in communities with strong religious affiliations, police often refused to take reports from LGBTQI+ victims who experienced discrimination. UniBAM and PETAL noted that LGBTQI+ persons were at times denied medical services and education and encountered family-based violence.

In June, a lesbian woman complained to PETAL that the BPD had refused to investigate incidences of vandalization and damage to her property because of her sexual orientation. According to the woman, over a three-month period prior to registering the complaint, her home was vandalized, her clothing was destroyed, and her electronics and appliances were damaged. She claimed threatening messages were left on the walls inside her house. When she reported the disturbances to police, officers refused to file her complaint because she could not identify a perpetrator.

Discrimination: The law does not prohibit discrimination specifically against LGBTQI+ persons in housing, employment, nationality laws, or access to government services, such as health care, but the constitution generally provides for the protection of all citizens from any type of discrimination. The extent of

discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or sex characteristics was difficult to ascertain due to a lack of official reporting.

In January, the LGBTQI+ community expressed outrage regarding the creation of a religious affairs portfolio under the government's Ministry of Constitutional and Political Affairs. After the portfolio's creation, Henry Charles Usher, Minister of Public Service, Constitutional and Political Reform, and Religious Affairs, stated that he wished to "merge the public service with the Christian fundamentals and principles upon which the country is based." The initiative was commended by the National Evangelical Association of Belize, which called the move "appropriate and fitting for the betterment of all Belizeans." According to human rights activist Caleb Orozco, the idea risked governance being influenced by Christian morality and not guided by human rights and dignity. Human rights-focused civil society groups such as the National AIDS Commission, Human Rights Commission of Belize, and National Women's Commission, also raised concerns.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: Legal gender recognition was not available.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices Specifically Targeting LGBTQI+ Individuals: There were no reported involuntary or coercive medical or psychological practices specifically targeting LGBTQI+ individuals.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly: There were no restrictions on freedom of expression, association, or peaceful assembly regarding LGBTQI+ issues, including the ability of LGBTQI+ organizations to legally register or convene events.

Persons with Disabilities

The law does not expressly prohibit discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities, but the constitution provides for the protection of all citizens from any type of discrimination. The law does not

mandate accessibility accommodations for persons with disabilities, and most public and private buildings and transportation were not accessible. Certain businesses and government departments had designated clerks to attend to the elderly and persons with disabilities. There were no policies to encourage hiring persons with disabilities in the public or private sectors. The government did not provide all information in accessible formats, and there were a few anecdotal reports of violence against persons with disabilities.

Mental health provisions and protections were generally poor. Informal government-organized committees advocating for persons with disabilities were tasked with public education and advocating for protections against discrimination. The country did not have a reliable system for identifying persons with disabilities who needed services. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Technology maintained the National Resource Center for Inclusive Education, which offered screening, diagnostic assessments, teacher training, parent and school support, specific therapies for students with special needs, and segregated education programs within the mainstream school system.

Children with disabilities attended specific classrooms with no more than 15 pupils for every two teachers, all of whom were specially trained to work with learners with disabilities. Postprimary and postsecondary educational services, vocational training, and life skills development opportunities were limited. One private school, one public school, and five education centers across the country specialized in working with children with disabilities. The special education centers were attached to public schools under the same management. Children with disabilities attended mainstream schools through the secondary level at a significantly lower rate than other children and were placed with nondisabled peers.

The special envoy for the development of families and children continued advocacy campaigns on behalf of persons with disabilities, especially children, and supported efforts to promote schools that took steps to create inclusive environments for them. Health care reportedly was at times difficult to access for persons with hearing disabilities and persons with mental disabilities, especially in

rural areas of the country.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

There was some societal discrimination against persons with HIV and AIDS. The government worked to combat it through public education efforts of the National AIDS Commission under the Ministry of Human Development.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law generally provides for the right to establish and join independent trade unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The Ministry of Rural Transformation, Community Development, Labor, and Local Government (Ministry of Labor) recognizes unions and employers associations after they are registered. The law establishes procedures for the registration and status of trade unions and employer organizations and for collective bargaining. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination and dissolution or suspension of unions by administrative authority, and it requires reinstatement of workers fired for union activity.

The unions, under their umbrella organizations the National Trade Union Congress of Belize (NTUCB) and the Civil Society Steering Group, are represented in the legislature by a senator whom the two entities designate. This senator provides direct input into the political and legislative process for labor organizations.

In disputes involving public- and private-sector employees who provide “essential services,” the law allows authorities to refer the dispute to compulsory arbitration, prohibit strikes, and terminate labor actions. The postal service, monetary and financial services, civil aviation, petroleum sector, port authority personnel (stevedores and ship pilots), and security services are deemed essential services by local laws. This list was more extensive than the International Labor Organization’s definition of essential services.

Workers may file complaints with the Ministry of Labor or seek redress from the courts for wrongful termination because of union activity, although it was difficult to prove that terminations were in retaliation for union activity. The ministry's Labor Department generally handled labor cases without lengthy delays and dealt with appeals through arbitration outside the court system. The court did not apply the law requiring reinstatement of workers fired for union activity but provided monetary compensation instead.

The government generally enforced labor law in the formal sector, although it did not apply the law for reinstatement of workers dismissed for union activity. The government did not effectively enforce it in the large informal sector due to a lack of registration from employers. There were complaints of administrative and judicial delays relating to labor complaints and disputes. Penalties were less than other similar civil rights violations. Penalties were rarely applied against violators.

Antiunion discrimination and other forms of employer interference in union functions sometimes occurred and, as a result, on several occasions unions threatened or carried out strikes. There were reports that workers were intimidated into either not joining a union or dropping union membership if they had joined. This situation occurred predominantly in the agricultural sector, where a significant number of the workers were from Central America and working in the country on temporary work permits.

In February, the government compensated Port of Belize Limited stevedores with 1.5 million Belize dollars (\$750,000) due to the privatization of the company in 2002. The stevedores claimed the privatization had led to lost earnings and held numerous strikes regarding this matter over the last 20 years.

In August, nurses, doctors, and other medical personnel held demonstrations across the country to highlight limited hospital resources, staffing shortages, and the government's failure to honor overtime salaries. Minister of Health and Wellness Kevin Bernard "sympathized" with the protesting health-care providers and met with their representatives to find a solution. The government compromised and

paid public health-care workers the money owed and committed to continue a dialogue to address other concerns raised during the demonstrations. Medical personnel returned to work the following day.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The constitution prohibits and criminalizes all forms of forced or compulsory labor. Penalties for forced or compulsory labor are covered under the antitrafficking law and are commensurate with those for similar crimes. The government did not effectively enforce the law. Resources and inspections to enforce compliance were insufficient. Forced labor of both Belizean and foreign women occurred in bars, nightclubs, and domestic service. Migrant men, women, and children were at risk for forced labor in agriculture, fishing, and the service sector, including restaurants and shops, particularly in the South Asian and Chinese communities.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The law prohibits discrimination with respect to employment based on race, sex, gender, language, HIV-positive status or other communicable diseases, nationality, religion, or social status. The government did not effectively enforce the law. The law does not explicitly prohibit discrimination in employment with respect to age, disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Penalties were commensurate with penalties related to civil rights but had never been applied against violators.

There were reports that discrimination in employment and occupation occurred

with respect to hiring persons with disabilities and LGBTQI+ applicants. One NGO reported that members of the LGBTQI+ community often had problems gaining and retaining employment due to discrimination in the workplace.

There were no officially reported cases of discrimination at work based on ethnicity, culture, or skin color, although anecdotal evidence suggested such cases occurred. NGOs noted that in most cases victims did not make formal reports due to fear of further victimization, such as loss of employment.

The law mandates equal pay for equal work, but women lagged men in wages and promotions (see section 6). Women earned 55 percent on average as that of men. There were sector-imposed restrictions on women working in certain industries, including mining, construction, factories, energy, water, and transportation.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: The national minimum wage was above the poverty-limit income level. The law sets the workweek at no more than six days or 45 hours and requires premium payment for overtime work. Workers are entitled to two workweeks of paid annual holiday. Additionally, there are 13 days designated as public and bank holidays. Employees who work on public and bank holidays are entitled to pay at time-and-a-half, except for Good Friday and Christmas, which are paid at twice the normal rate. In July, the normal worker week for government officials was restored to 40 hours, after having been reduced in 2021 due to a 10 percent salary cut.

The minimum wage was generally respected. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence from NGOs and employers suggested that undocumented Central American workers, particularly young service workers and agricultural laborers, were regularly paid below the minimum wage.

Occupational Safety and Health: The country does not have a specific Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) law, but the Factories Act and the Labour Act contain provisions in relation to occupation, safety, and health in the

workplace. OSH regulations for all industries provide that the employer must take “reasonable care” for the safety of employees. The regulations further provide that every employer who provides or arranges accommodation for workers to reside at or near a place of employment shall provide and maintain sufficient and hygienic housing accommodations, a sufficient supply of wholesome water, and sufficient and proper sanitary arrangements. OSH experts identified unsafe conditions and developed and implemented safety regulations. There were no major work accidents during the year.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: The Ministry of Labor did not consistently enforce minimum wage, hour, and health and safety (OSH) regulations. Inspectors could make unannounced visits and initiate penalties, but the number of inspectors was not sufficient to secure compliance, especially in the more remote areas. Fines varied according to the infraction but generally were less than those for similar crimes. Penalties were rarely applied to violators.

Informal Sector: The International Monetary Fund in 2015 estimated the informal economy generated 47 percent of GDP. Most labor violations pertaining to acceptable conditions of work occurred in the informal sector, but authorities were not able to properly monitor and carry out inspections. The basic rights of part-time workers and workers in the informal economy were protected by labor laws, but those who were not registered in the social security system were not afforded social protection by government entities.

NGOs working in migrant communities in the informal sector asserted that in certain industries, particularly the banana, citrus, and construction sectors, employers often did not respect due process, did not pay minimum wages, and classified workers as contract and nonpermanent employees to avoid providing certain benefits. An NGO noted that both national and migrant informal workers continued to be denied labor rights.